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# DON'T MESS WITH JESS

Hometown Love, Book One

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Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-135-4

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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“Well, it isn’t my fault you can’t keep a nanny,” Jessie Owens said, as she put her hands on her hips and glared at MacAllister Evans, the father of a three-month-old baby boy. “Maybe you should try to be a little less of, oh, say, a dirtbag scumball? Just a thought.”

“Dirtbag scumball? I don’t even know what that is,” he said, giving her his usual exasperated look.

“Seriously? Well, you have so many letters after your name, I’m sure you can figure it out.” Jessie glanced over at the baby monitor. Sam was still sleeping soundly in his crib in his bedroom. His cold, sterile bedroom. If she was staying, she’d be fixing that up for sure. No kid deserved to grow up in a gray room, no matter how trendy it was.

“Maybe the smart thing would be if I didn’t try to figure it out,” he said slowly, running his fingers through his dark hair in a gesture that tugged at her heart. No, it didn’t. Sure, he was tired, but that meant nothing. Everyone got tired.

“Maybe so,” she said. “Okay, I won’t leave tonight, but we are laying out some ground rules. I’m here to take care of Sam

and run the house and interview nannies for you. I'm not here to take your verbal abuse."

"Verbal abuse? Jessie, I'm honestly bewildered here." He yawned, and once again that stupid sympathy thing in her heart twanged.

"Mac, come on. I made you a plate earlier when I thought you'd be here for dinner, and I did not deserve to be growled at because I mentioned it."

"I'm not used to having to check in with a jailer." He grinned at her. Okay, that was different. The only time she'd seen him smile in the last twelve hours was when he was kissing Sam goodbye this morning. She liked it.

"Well, get used to it, buddy. I left Macintyre for you and I'm here for the next couple months unless we find the perfect nanny before then. And unless you change your attitude, who knows how long she will last?" Jessie led the way into the kitchen, pulled the plate out of the fridge and popped it in the microwave. Mac sat down slowly at the kitchen island.

"Need any help?" he asked, shrugging out of his suit jacket.

"I think I can manage to warm up a plate," she said.

"Good to know. So how was Sam today?"

Jessie put a plate of food in front of him and filled him a glass of water to go with it. "Thank you," he said, and began eating hungrily.

"Sam was perfection, he's such a good baby. I'm sure he's not the reason you went through three nannies in three weeks," she said. "And that is not good for him."

"You're right," he said, between bites. "I know that, and Jessie, thanks for coming. I know you left a lot to be here."

"You know I'd do anything for Carlene, including taking Sam to raise," she said, crossing her arms again. "I'm a teacher. My hours are better than yours. I could give him a lot more attention."

"Sam is my nephew, my blood, and I won't abandon him," he said, picking up a second roll.

"You want more?" She moved the dish closer to him. "And Carly was my best friend, all our lives. She's like my sister, too, you know, and letting me raise him would not be abandoning him." Jessie sighed. She'd had this conversation with him before, and with her lawyer, though he didn't know that. There was no way she could get custody of Sam over Carlene's twin brother unless she proved abuse or neglect and apparently working a hundred hours a week was not either one of those.

Technically, she was not related, and she knew Mac would fight her tooth and nail and his many dollars. So here she was, using her summer break to take care of Sam and try to convince Mac that Sam would be better off with her. Or be a little sneaky and maybe find out something she could use in court. Oh, who was she fooling? Mac always walked the straight and narrow and she bet he didn't cheat once on any test to achieve his valedictorian status in his pricey Ivy League college. But she was here, and she might as well try. For Sam and Carlene. It broke her heart to think of Carly's baby being raised by nannies when she was perfectly willing and able.

"It would feel like it," he said. "No to more food, though it was good, I'm just worn out. I'm going to check on Sam, change and feed him, and go to bed. Thanks, Jess, I'm glad you're here and I'll try not to growl again."

"You're welcome," she said, picking his plate up. "No, I don't mind cleaning up after you," Jessie said to the empty room. Well, she was here to be his maid, apparently, but she refused to be his personal verbal whipping boy. He could keep a civil tone in his head. If he could be kind to his clients all day, he could be nice to her. It would be good practice for him, for when Sam got older. Pretending to be nice to people could be faked. She taught school and while the kids did, of course, irritate her sometimes, it was

the parents she often had to fake it with. Mac could learn. If he planned to keep a nanny, and really, he had to have one, no day care around here stayed open the weird hours he worked. Sometimes he left at five in the morning, and didn't come home until after ten at night. Other times he kept what she called real people hours, working basically eight to five but he rarely knew when those days were or would be. That was what he'd told her anyway. She'd find out over the next few weeks and she'd document everything, in case she needed to try and go to court over the little love.

She'd been in the room when he was born. Carly's husband had been killed in Iraq six weeks before he arrived. She'd been there for her the entire time and fell in love with Sam at first sight, bloody and icky and the most gorgeous thing she'd ever seen. Carlene had passed away very unexpectedly less than a week after he was born from a stroke. Who knew that happened? She didn't but she did now.

Mac had the baby in his house before the funeral was over. That had been just over two months ago, then he'd gone through three nannies in the next month and he'd called her panicked. School was out now, and she stepped in to provide little Sam with the stability he needed and deserved. If she couldn't have custody of Sam and raise him in Macintyre—where she, Carly, and Mac had grown up and where she now lived and worked—she was at least going to make sure he was safe and happy, and out of that sterile gray room. She'd find him an older nanny, who knew her stuff, didn't mind living in, and who could keep up with Sam, someone who would watch him grow up, like she and Carlene would have if either of them had been allowed to do that. She shot a look to the ceiling. "I will take care of our boy, Carly, I promise."

She could almost hear her best friend saying, "I know. Don't mess with Jess."

"Darn right, don't mess with Jess," she muttered to the dishwasher as she turned it on. Sam had too many losses already in

his short little life and she was not going to be one of them. MacAllister just better realize that.

Glancing over at the monitor, she sighed. There sat Mac in the wooden rocker, holding Sam and rocking him. Leaning over, she turned it up. Hey, she wasn't above eavesdropping if the situation deemed it necessary.

"Aunt Jess is going to take good care of you while I work. What are you going to call me, little man? You good with Daddy? It's okay with me. Your other daddy was a good man, but he can't be here. I'll always be here. Yeah, you getting sleepy? Daddy is too. Night, little man." Jessie watched him put the baby down and leave the room.

Great. He needed to stop that heartstring tugging thing he was doing to her. Soon. Glancing at the clock, she yawned. Almost eleven, hopefully Sam would sleep at least four or five hours since he just had a bottle and dry pants. She needed to get some sleep too, because she had a long day ahead of her tomorrow. Including painting the baby's room. Should she ask Mac? Nah, she'd just let him figure it out on his own. That would work out well. Despite Mac being a high and mighty financial lawyer something or other she didn't quite understand, or care to, she'd grown up with him. She'd known him almost as well as she knew Carlene. Well, she knew young Mac, she didn't really know the man Mac very well. But she would, oh yes, she would.

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MAC WALKED in the house the next afternoon, in a surprisingly good mood. It had been a short day for him, but not for most people. He regularly worked twelve to fourteen or more hours a day. Luckily his commute lasted less than ten minutes, which was why he'd bought this house to begin with. Four bedrooms, three and a half baths had seemed overkill at the time, but he'd liked it, could afford it and figured he'd just shut off the rooms he didn't

need. Good thing he had them, now that he was raising the boy who would be his son as soon as the paperwork went through, and would probably have a live-in nanny for years. His life had changed so much since Carlene died. Sniffing, he tried to figure out what that smell could be. Didn't smell like supper. "Jess?" he called out. Probably in Sam's room, or the kitchen, he figured. Looking into the monitor, he cocked his head. Something was off. Where was his son? The crib wasn't there. Had she taken off with him. "Jessie!" he yelled, and took the stairs two at a time, to get to the baby's room. The door stood open and that weird smell got stronger. Taking a deep breath he stepped in. Empty, there was nothing in there. However, the walls were painted. Three bright red and one some kind of pink. "Jess!"

"Shh, the baby is sleeping." She came up from behind him. "Do you love it?"

"Where's my boy and where's all the stuff?" He couldn't stop staring at the wall. What color was that?

"He's asleep in my room for the night. This room needs to air out then I'll move him back in tomorrow." She sounded very pleased with herself.

"What did you do?"

"Well," she said as if it were the most practical thing in the world, "I couldn't really let him sleep in a jail cell, now could I?"

"A jail cell? How would you know what a jail cell... never mind. Why did you paint my son's room pink?"

"Dusty rose is Carlene's favorite color," she said as if that explained anything.

"And so you painted my son's room pink," he said.

"Dusty rose, and it's just one wall, where the crib is going, so he will be reminded of his mom every time he opens his eyes," she slipped under his arm, into the room. "The rest is raspberry red," she said.

"Raspberry red. I thought gray was the new white in house colors."



“Did you? Who told you that?” She seemed genuinely curious.

“My realtor when I bought the house. And why are we doing this and did it cross your mind I might want to be involved or at least asked or told about it? Since it’s my house.”

“We are doing this because his room was cold, boring and he deserved better. And no, I didn’t think to ask you. Why would I? If you wanted it done, you would have done it in the month you had him here. You didn’t, so I did.” Mac looked at her, wondering if she was just a little nuts. “Oh, and you owe me a thousand bucks.”

“What?”

“And I didn’t make supper so we can order pizza unless you want to go out.” She slipped under his arm again and headed down the hall back toward her room.

What he needed was a drink. He stared at the walls once more, then walked over and opened the window to let it air out a little better. It was only paint, he reminded himself. He could get it painted over. Jess was trying to help. He needed to remember that.

What he wanted to do though, was the same thing he’d wanted to do since she was a smart mouth teenager and that was turn her over his knee and blister her butt. She really needed an attitude adjustment. But she was here to help. Here to help, he reminded himself. Driving him nuts just happened to be a fun little perk for her. Well, he wouldn’t let her. He’d be cool and calm and... “A thousand bucks for a paint job?” That couldn’t be right.

Walking down to her room, he knocked on the door. “Come in,” she called softly.

There was his boy. He walked over and stared down at the sleeping baby, wanting to pick him up. He’d do anything for him. He’d never wanted kids. It had been all about him, until the first time he’d held Samuel MacAllister O’Brian soon to be Evans.

Named after, Carlene had told him, his dad and her favorite brother.

“Let’s go downstairs,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she announced, as if that meant anything.

“Now,” he said, looking into her eyes that often changed from gray to green. Now they were almost green. Why? That usually only happened when she was excited about something, like gearing up to play a soccer game or play a prank on him and his friends. He didn’t trust her green eyes.

“Whatever,” she said, her tone too docile to do anything to reassure him.

“I’m going to change,” he said, deciding if there was going to be a confrontation, he might as well be comfortable.

Coming down to the kitchen, in his jeans and sneakers, he looked at the island. There were receipts from a half a dozen stores. “Sam and I went shopping today before I painted,” she said. “But really, it would be a lot better if you’d just give me your Amazon password. Hauling a baby in and out of the car a dozen times is exhausting.”

“What more could you possibly need?” He picked up the receipt for paint, brushes, tarps and a few other things. Picking up another one he looked at it and said, “You bought him a bed?”

“He’s going to need a bed,” she informed him. “Do you still eat all meat on your pizza or has your palate changed? Because I ordered you all meat.”

“All meat is fine. He’s not even three months old. He’ll be...” How old would he be when he needed a bed? Mac realized he had no clue. Well, it couldn’t be now, he couldn’t even sit up yet. Was that normal?

“Yes, you don’t even know. I need his doctor records, too. I’m sure he needs some vaccines soon,” she said. “Do you have them?”

Mac felt his head spin. "Text me a list of things you need," he suggested.

She nodded, her dark hair falling around her shoulders. "The pizza will be here in five minutes," she tapped into her phone and said, "that will be \$30 including tip."

"Someone broke me this afternoon," he said and just handed her his wallet. Why not? Jess was going to do what Jess wanted to do.

"Work harder," she suggested, pulling cash from his wallet and handing it back. "You have a son to raise and a nanny to pay."

"And apparently," he picked another receipt up, "bedding and toys to buy."

"You're welcome." She smiled at him.

"We need to discuss a budget," he tried to glare at her.

"That is you and your new nanny's issue," she waved him off. "I'm just here to help out."

"Woman, if this is helping, I'd hate to see you hinder," he suddenly flashed back to his dad who had told his mom those same exact words how many times growing up.

Jess seemed to recognize them, too, she'd been under his family's roof most of her life, then his dad had a heart attack on the golf course when he and Carly were six. His mom had suddenly been a single parent.

"Seriously, Mac? I think the words you meant were 'oh, Jess, you are amazing, I adore every little thing you do for me', right?"

"I need a beer," Mac opened the refrigerator door and grabbed two. "Here, you probably need one after all that shopping."

"And painting," she reminded him, taking the bottle from him as her stomach growled loudly. "Sorry, I forgot to eat today."

"Forget to eat again, and I'll make sure you have consequences," he said. "Last thing I need is my son's caretaker passing out on the job."

Wrinkling her nose at him, she took a swig of her beer, and said, “You into force feeding?”

“No, I’m into knocking some sense into the other end,” he said. Now that would be a better stress relief than a bottle of beer. Even though it was very good beer.

Jess snorted and laughed. “Sorry, but that almost sounds like...”

“Yes, if you are under my roof caring for my child and don’t take care of yourself, little girl, I will put you over my knee and blister your butt.”

Jess stared at him. The doorbell rang, and she went to answer it, shaking her head as he watched her walk away. Why had he never noticed her before? Because she’d grown up with his sister, of course and he’d thought of them as a set, a pair. But she wasn’t his sister, and he was serious. She better take care of herself.

Jess traded money for pizza and walked back into the kitchen. He had a couple plates out and she decided not to ask him for clarification on his last statement. Chalking it up to his having had a few stressful days and then her springing a thousand-dollar bill on him, sure, he could be allowed to bluster. She didn’t believe he’d actually do that for a minute. Did she? Nope. Last thing he was going to do was run her off. The thought of him doing... well, that, gave her shivers though and an odd feeling in her stomach. He didn’t know, he couldn’t know, no, it was just him being Mac, nothing more. It wasn’t like he’d read her stories or anything. She needed to just ignore his nonsense.

“I have three interviews scheduled for next week with nannies,” she said. “If I get any I like, then I’ll set up a time on Saturday for you to talk with them. I’ll try and get a few more lined up, too. I’m taking tomorrow to set up the nursery, and the new crib will be here early afternoon, so that should work out well.”

“I thought you bought a toddler bed or something?”

“Yes, but I’m homing the crib he’s in now to the organization here in town that helps people needing a hand, and the new one will convert into a toddler bed as he grows. If you are lucky, you won’t have to buy him another bed until he’s in school.” Jess sighed in ecstasy as she took her first bite of pizza. She really did need to remember to eat.

“That doesn’t make sense to me,” Mac said.

“It doesn’t have to. Just pay the bills, smile and nod. I’ll be out of your hair soon enough,” she said, and took another bite of pizza.

“You aren’t bad to have around,” Mac said. “I just would like to be involved in decisions that affect my son.”

“You keep saying my son,” Jess said, slowly. “Are you adopting him or just trying to get used to the idea?”

“It will take a while, but yes, I’m planning to adopt him. I have a lot of hoops to jump through.” He looked at her over his second piece of pizza, and added, “I don’t know how I’m going to explain his pink room on the home visit from the social worker.”

“I doubt if the color of his room will affect anything and besides, it’s mostly raspberry.”

“It affected you,” he retorted.

“Only because what you had him in was cold and sterile and kinda not for a baby,” she explained. “Once I get done with his room, you will love it and so will anyone else who comes in.” Jess took another bite of pizza and dared him to tell her differently. He was adopting Sam. That should be good news, right? Well, it would be if he wasn’t gone all the time at work, and the only parent. Sam would never lack for anything material in this life, but who was going to love him and kiss his boo boos, teach him how to tie his shoes and how to be a decent man, if his dad was always either at work or exhausted? The nanny she was in charge of hiring. The burden of that felt heavy on her shoulders. He was in charge of the final decision, she reminded herself, and

then reminded herself to swallow her chewed food. One thing at a time.

“Do you have plans for the weekend?” she asked him.

“Thought I’d spend the weekend throwing the ball around with my boy,” he said.

“Darn, I didn’t put a ball and glove on my buying list,” she pouted.

“Maybe next weekend, then. No, no plans, do you need to do something?”

“No, was just curious if you’d be here when I put the new bed together. I didn’t know your usual routine, if you worked or what.”

“Before Sam, I’d sleep until noon on Saturday, go out on Saturday night, sleep until noon on Sunday and then do house chores, laundry and things in the afternoon. Exciting life.”

“Sounds like it. I hear Sam.” She started to stand up, but he held up his hand.

“I’ll get him.”

Jess put the pizza away, and thought about what he’d said. Adoption. It wasn’t disloyal to Carlene. She would have wanted him to go to family if she had any idea something would happen to her. Of course, Jess considered herself family, too. But, legally, yeah, she had no chance when Mac was willing, able and stable. Could she simply be his favorite Aunt Jess? She’d have to be. Unless she found out something that made her question his parenting ability or who knows what else.

Mac came in, holding the sobbing baby just a minute later. “Where did you put his bottles?”

“I moved the mini fridge and the warmer to the guest room.” Jess got up and went to the refrigerator. “Here, I’ll warm this one real quick.” Grabbing a pan from the drainer, she put it on the stove with some water and placed the bottle in it. “Shh, hang in there, baby, it won’t take long.” Sam didn’t believe her and revved up while Mac jostled him and patted him.

“Shh, Sammy boy, you are fine, I promise. Daddy’s here.”

There he went again. She was going to have to get used to it. The bottle didn’t take long to warm and soon Sam slurped it down happily.

“He is such an easy baby,” she said. “Feed him, keep him dry.”

“Paint his room pink,” Mac said, dryly, not taking his eyes off the baby.

“A girl does what she can to make a baby happy,” Jessie agreed. “Get over it, Mac. It was Carly’s favorite color and I’m not going to let him forget his mom.”

“I won’t either,” Mac said, standing with the baby in the crook of his arm, with the bottle in the other. “Or his first dad.”

“Okay, good.”

“Tomorrow morning, we need to talk,” he said.

“I thought we were talking,” Jess replied. “I need to do laundry. Oh and you need to call your mom, if you haven’t. It’s her birthday. Or better yet, video chat and let her see her grandson.”

Mac shook his head as she walked out of the room. Seriously. What was wrong with him asking her to come? He needed help, that was why. Walking over to the laptop in the corner, he dialed his mom’s number. “Happy birthday, Mom. Sam would say the same, but he’s zonked out.” He focused the monitor on the now sleeping baby.

“What a pretty baby,” she said. “Is it my birthday?”

“It is,” he said.

“Then I should be going to the party tonight,” she said. “Where is Carlene?”

“She’s with Jessie,” he assured her.

“Don’t mess with Jess,” his mom said. “I need to get ready for the party.”

“Bye, Mom, Bye, Eve,” he said to the aide standing there who had answered the phone. “Thank you for taking such good care of her.” He closed the laptop and felt sad. His mom’s

disease was slowly taking the woman who had raised Carlene and him alone with all the passion and love that Sam would miss in his life, without a fierce loving mother. He hated this little one would be raised by nannies and daycares, and him, of course, but it wasn't the same. Lots of kids did well with a single parent. His mom had been a nurse who worked long hours, but he never doubted she loved them and while she had missed some things, she had also attended others. Sam would never doubt he was loved or who his father was. But he really needed a mother. In a few years, he could cut down his insane schedule and be there for ball games or concerts and parent conferences at school, but he really needed to focus right now, and Sam really needed a mom, no, a nanny. He walked into the dark living room and sat down in the rocker by the window, just wanting a little time with his boy. Hearing Jessie go upstairs, he smiled. It was nice to have another adult, her, in the house.

Later, walking upstairs with the sleeping baby, he accidentally walked into the pink room, before he remembered the crib was in Jessie's room for the night.

Her door was open, so he walked in, to put Sam down. "Jess? What's wrong?"

She sat cross legged on her bed, tears streaming down her face. Mac carefully laid the baby down, then went to the bed, grabbed her hand, and pulled her out of the room. He walked down the hall to his room where she broke down in sobs before they got a foot in the door. "Jess, talk to me. What's wrong?"

"My school closed. I don't have a job to go back to."

He sat her down beside him on his bed. Did he make it this morning or had she? He didn't remember. It didn't matter, it mattered that Jess was upset. "What do you mean your school closed?"

"I work for a private school. The board decided to close ours and merge with another one and my job is redundant," she



looked up at him. "I've been there five years, and I'm redundant."

"I'm so sorry, Jess. That has to be..." He struggled for a word. Had to be what? "Had to be horrible news to hear." He patted her back and she cried harder. Though he knew it was something they not only did, but often needed to do, he was no good with crying females. What did you do with one? Did you pet it? Offer it water? Okay, pretend she was Sam, he told himself. Gathering her in his arms, he settled her on his lap and wrapped his arms around her while she sobbed into his shoulder.

"Shh, it's okay," he told her and then because it sounded good, he told her again, and patted her back. Eventually, she calmed down, and just took a few hitching sobs. Was he supposed to say something?

"Jess, I'm sorry," he said. That sounded good. Females liked to talk about their emotions. Ask questions. "Did you not have a clue it was going to happen?"

She shook her head and sniffled. He reached for a tissue on the nightstand and handed it to her. "I'd heard rumors off and on for years, but was always told when it happened, we'd have a couple years notice. I had no information saying they were even in negotiations, much less making a decision about closing."

"You're in shock," he said, patting her back again, hoping she wouldn't burp like Sam. Well, if she did, he'd pretend she didn't. See, he was acing this. Who said he couldn't handle crying females? The last one he'd made cry, naturally.

"Of course I'm in shock! I just lost my job, and it's probably too late in the year to get another teaching job, that all the other teachers in my school will be vying for, too. I'm going to lose my house and I don't know what I'm going to do!" Her voice continued to rise, and he just held her tightly and rubbed her back. Just in case the patting did create an unfortunate side effect.

"Well, one thing you don't have to do is make any decisions tonight," he said. "There is nothing you can do tonight anyway."

Why don't you and me and Sam do something tomorrow? Let's do a quick getaway somewhere and take your mind off things, then you can hit the ground refreshed and start figuring things out on Monday?"

"Ignore it and it will go away?" she asked, looking up at him, her tear-filled eyes almost glowing green, as they always were when her emotions were heightened. He liked her gray eyes.

"No, just step back away from the problem for a finite amount of time and then approach it with a new perspective."

She nodded slowly. "Okay, I can agree with that. Thank you for the offer. Where are we going?"

"I don't know, I'll figure it out. Just pack an overnight bag for you and Sam with casual clothes and..." They both started at a buzz from downstairs. "The dryer is done."

"And I'm sitting on your lap and I got your shirt all wet, I'm sorry, Mac." She stood up and he had to admit he missed her on his lap. Probably not a good time to tell her that. He'd imagined her over his lap a few times, but not really on his lap. Odd.

"Non-issue," he said. "Don't worry, Jess, things will work out. You're tough, strong and smart."

"And in control, I know." She looked at him, and continued, "Sometimes, though, I wish I wasn't for a short amount of time."

Mac understood, probably more than she did, exactly what she was talking about. He might not be able to handle crying women very well, but he did understand the cathartic release that a good cry had for many of them. He also understood the power exchange many strong women wished to have at home. Now was not the time to explain that to her, and besides, she wasn't his in any way, shape or form. She was his sister's best friend, little Sam's godmother and honorary aunt, but not his date, live-in love or someone he was in a relationship with. Buddies, friends, only.

Right now, though, he had some thinking to do, because suddenly, he thought he had an option for her. He'd find a time

during their getaway to talk to her about it, after he thought more on it, himself.

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JESS WENT DOWNSTAIRS, pulled the clothes from the dryer and began folding them on the small handy counter next to it. Her mind raced, as she wondered what she would do. Well, she'd have to update her résumé and get it out as soon as possible. A sudden wave of homesickness swept over her. She wanted to be in her little cottage at home. Would she be able to keep it? It suddenly seemed like security and safety. That was ridiculous. It was simply a pile of stone and wood. She was her own security and safety. Making her decisions and doing what she wanted to do, and she'd figure out her own problems. Smart, educated, with a good work record, she'd have no trouble finding another job. Right? Probably. Maybe. Who knew? She'd find out.

Yawning, she finished folding clothes and went to put Sam's away. She'd had a long day, and would be up a time or two with Sam tonight, since he was in her bedroom. And she wouldn't have time to move things back tomorrow, depending on what time Mac wanted to leave. Maybe he was right, though, a little time away, to rest and refresh would be a good thing before her crazy busy week ahead. Plus it would let the paint smell dissipate some more before she moved Sam back in there. After a quick shower, she crawled into her bed, quietly, though Sam was a good sleeper, and stared at the ceiling. If she got a nanny hired next week, she could be back home in two weeks, ready to hit the job hunting hard. If they went somewhere tomorrow, she'd have to postpone the bed delivery. Her mind raced with all the details she needed to do, get done, and plan, and so she stared at the ceiling.

Her phone dinged and she looked at it. It had been blowing up with texts from her co-workers. Everyone was upset. Of

course. But Marie just announced she was going back to school, instead of job hunting. Easy for her, she had a husband to help her out. Jessie had thought about going back to school, but it hadn't seemed practical while working full-time. Other people did it, but while she often took a class during the summer, because she had to keep up with her continuing education, and she really wanted to earn her Masters, she hadn't made the commitment to go back full-time yet. Was it too late? Find a job first, mortgage had to be paid, she reminded herself, then think about school. Also think about finding a nanny for Sam and finishing his room.

Smiling, she thought of Mac's reaction when he'd seen the dusty pink wall. Too funny. It had so been worth it. She'd debated on it, but decided she really wanted to see his reaction. He was always so infuriatingly calm when he wasn't grumbling and grumpy. Loving to push his buttons to see if she could get a rise out of him was one of the reasons she enjoyed being around him so much. As a teenager, he'd been a bit of a wild thing, but had settled down toward the end of college and now was one of the most proper and buttoned up men she knew. He might have grown up, but she didn't have to if she didn't want to. It was just fun to see the emotions cross his face and then be forced back down. One day she'd get him to, well, she didn't know what, but it would be fun to watch it happen. He had it in him, she knew he did. He might even have it in him to, 'don't go there, Jess,' she whispered to herself softly. She didn't want to think about him threatening to spank her. It was a one off, just something he'd tossed out there, nothing he really meant.

Why did she care about Mac and his emotions? Well, she knew he'd built a wall since Carly died. That wasn't healthy and it wouldn't be good for Sam long term. Plus, if he were ever to get married and give Sam siblings, then he needed to be ready. He'd had girlfriends in college, she knew, and after, according to Carly, but no one ever hung around long. No clue why. He

seemed nice enough, if you liked them staid and solid, but her goal was not only to make sure Sam had stability before she left, but make sure that, if she couldn't raise him herself, that Mac was the guy she knew he could be.

He'd done a good job comforting her earlier. She appreciated that, and some good woman would be the happy recipient of that in the future. She needed to do that for Sam. He deserved a good mom figure in his life. As long as she'd always be the favorite aunt, anyway.

Drifting off to sleep, she wondered where they would go tomorrow and vowed to have a good weekend, despite her worries. Why not? Worries would still be there Monday.

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"YOU ENJOYED THAT MORE THAN SAM," Mac said as they loaded the car back up after a long but gorgeous day.

"Sam is not quite three months old, about the only things he likes is being fed and being held." She reminded him as she broke down the stroller to go in the trunk. "But yeah, I had a really good time, it's been years since I've been to this zoo." The St. Louis zoo was about three hours from Macintyre and they'd often done day trips here when they were younger.

"Remember when you, Carly, Ryan and I went? And Mom got tired and let us run wild while she rested at the snow cone stand? We spent an hour making faces at the gorillas." He clicked Sam into the car seat as she tucked the diaper bag next to him.

"And then made Carly scream in the reptile house?" Jess giggled. "That was a good time! Have you heard from Ryan lately? You two were as inseparable as Carly and me."

"We talk several times a week, he went through a divorce last year," he said.

"That's too bad. Any kids?"

"Just one, she lives with her mom."

“That has to be hard.” Jess realized that is basically what she’d be doing with her—with Mac’s—little one. Parenting from afar. Aunt-ing from afar. It was so hard not to fall in love with him, though, and want to be with him every day. She’d get used to it, she assured herself. Like the kindergarten moms who walked out of the school on the first day bawling their hearts and eyes out, and by end of week two, were dropping the kids off at the door with a wave. People adjust. She would too. Sam was so little, he wouldn’t remember these short weeks when she had been his support system. Hopefully she could always get him for a month or at least a couple weeks in the summer every year. Sighing, she thought, if she still taught, anyway.

“Tired?” Mac asked as they clipped in. “I give Sam until we get out of the parking lot to zonk out.”

“Yeah, he had a rough day, being cute and carried around,” Jessie teased.

“Hey, it’s hard to be a baby, just ask him,” Mac said. “I thought we’d go to the hotel and clean up a bit, then I’ll take you out to a nice dinner.”

“You said to pack casual,” Jess protested.

Mac shot her that grin that made her weirdly tingle, she didn’t like it. “Okay, a nice dinner in a casual place.”

“Deal. Hopefully they have the crib set up in the room by now.”

“You sure you are okay sharing the room with me?” he asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” That was the only answer that question deserved.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, making her giggle.

She watched the roads as they drove back to the hotel they’d checked into earlier that morning. “You are right, he’s zonked out,” she said, looking in the baby mirror to see him. “Mac, I just love him so much.” Well, that slipped out.

“I am glad. He’s going to need all the love he can get while he grows up. Even though he won’t ever remember it, he’s had a

rough start in life,” Mac said. “He doesn’t have much family and those of us in it will have to step up.”

“What about his dad’s family?” she asked. “Have they ever contacted you or anything?”

Mac shook his head. “Sam, his dad, I think you already know, grew up in foster care and we don’t have any idea of his family. My lawyer is looking into it, though. I don’t want any surprises down the road.”

Jessie shuddered. “I don’t either. That’s a scary thought, though really, no one could be more qualified than you.”

“My fear is that maybe Sam has a sister or brother he never met, who is married and has a kid his age and would raise them together and a judge would see that as more of a family home than what I can give.”

“That almost makes me ill, but yeah, I’ve heard of that kind of thing, too,” she said, slowly. “But nothing so far?”

“No relatives so far,” he said. “My lawyer hired a PI and hopefully that will all be on record, too. That we did everything possible to find someone.”

“I hope there is nothing to find. Next exit.”

“So do I.” He flipped on his blinker. “I want everything legal as soon as I can get it.”

“If you get married in the next couple years, have your wife adopt him, too,” Jessie suggested. “It sure can’t hurt.”

“Finding someone while I’m working all the time and raising a baby is a piece of cake,” he said.

“Step it up, get on that.” Jessie smiled over at him. “You’re kinda cute and when you try, you can be almost decent. Plus you have that really really cute baby.”

“With all those things going for me, I should be beating them off with a stick,” he teased.

“Maybe, if you didn’t talk about blistering their butts like you tell me all the time, it might be easier. Just a helpful dating hint, for you.”

“What if, like you, they deserve or want their butts blistered?”

“Mac!”

“Jess!”

“I swear.”

“Don’t swear in front of my child. I can have you over my knee as soon as we get in the room.”

“I give up.”

“You never give up.” He found a parking spot in the hotel parking lot and parked. “One of the many things I admire about you.”

Jess shook her head and got out of the car. “You getting him or the stuff?” Silly man. There was no way she wanted to be spanked like a child. That was nonsense. Utter and complete nonsense and the fact it had always intrigued her meant nothing. She felt fascinated by gorillas too but it didn’t mean she wanted one.

Standing in the shower just a few minutes later, she let the heat and sweat roll off her while she thought about being with Mac. No, she wasn’t thinking that. He was the closest thing she had to a brother, of course! Of course. True, he wasn’t but, still.

She hoped Sam slept well in the crib that the hotel had brought up, and that he slept through dinner. She smiled, it wouldn’t be long before he was sitting in the highchair beside them, throwing food on the floor. Beside them? What was she thinking? She was being ridiculous. Her entire world right now, was finding him a nanny, and finding herself a job. Oh, and take care of him in the meantime.

Dressing awkwardly in the small bathroom, she came out, and said, “You can shower, I’ll watch the baby and do my hair and things.”

“And things?”

“Hush, a girl needs to do what she needs to do.” Wrinkling her nose at him as he went into the bathroom, she went in to check on Sam before she did her hair and makeup. As always, he



slept on his back with his arms outstretched. He was absolute perfection, the best baby in the world.

Two hours later, she was glaring at Mac as they stood on the street in front of the restaurant. "I can't make him stop. You make him stop."

"I can't make him stop. Maybe we should take him to the ER?"

"You seriously want to show up at the emergency room and tell them your baby is crying?"

"I sort of really do. Why won't he stop? He never does this." Mac jostled him up and down outside the restaurant where they had been having dinner before the wailing began. She'd taken one lovely bite of the best salmon she'd tasted when this loud shrieking noise started. It had come from their baby. She picked him up and put a bottle in his mouth. He didn't want it. He wasn't wet but he was sure loud. She tried burping him. Then Mac took him and tried the same things she did then they both decided, for the sake of not being melted into a puddle by all the death glares they were getting, they would take him outside.

It didn't help. People walking by gave them death glares too. They were going to be melted. Nothing she could do about it.

"What is wrong with him?" Jessie took him back from Mac who seemed eager to give him up. "Why is he crying?"

"How would I know? Sam! You're fine. No reason to cry!" Mac told him.

"Oh, sure. He's going to say, 'fine, dad, I'm all good now that I know there is no reason'. Good plan." Jess jostled him and put him over her shoulder trying to burp him again.

"Jess, he never does this. I'm going to see if there is a doc in the box close."

"He's just crying," she said. "I think that is overreacting."

"He's my kid, not yours. I will make the decision." Mac scrolled through his phone while she patted and rocked back and forth.

“Are you okay?” An older woman stood before them. “Is there any way I can help?”

“He won’t stop crying,” Jess told her. “We don’t know why.”

She held out her arms. “Here, let me see, I’m a nurse and I have five kids.”

Jess looked at Mac who nodded. She handed Sam to the woman, who crooned at him. “Ahh, little man, what happened in your day today?” Jess watched the way she held him, over her arm, and patted his back. She patted his back! She’d done that, it hadn’t helped.

Suddenly Sam let out a huge burp and settled down. The woman put him in the crook of her arm and crooned, “We had a nasty gas bubble, didn’t we? But it’s all gone now. Tell Mom and Dad you are okay, so they won’t worry anymore.”

She handed him back to Jessie, who almost cried at the silence and the fact he didn’t seem upset anymore. “Why did that happen?” she whispered to the angel from above.

Smiling, she said, “That happens sometimes with babies. It just does. Might be different water, environment, the way he was lying, all kinds of things. But he seems over it now. Call his doctor Monday if you are worried and get him checked out, but from personal experience, he’s fine. Now, Mommy and Daddy, go finish your dinner. You are doing just fine.”

“Thank you so much. Can I buy your dinner?” Mac asked her.

“Oh, I’m good. You two just take care of that perfect child you created.” With that she walked away and Jessie looked at Mac.

“Do we dare go back in?”

“We have to, we left his car seat in there,” Mac said. “Is he asleep? What is a gas bubble? I need to take a class.”

“Or your nanny does,” she said, tartly. They walked back in and she felt like slinking to their booth.

“Ow,” he said as they sat down and stared at their now cold

food. "Jess, I'm doing the best I can. I don't know what else to do."

"I know." She poked at her unappetizing plate. "I'm sorry. Just a little stressed." She looked over at Sam, now slumbering like the angel he usually was. "Between losing my job and everything going on..."

"I get it," he said. "But these pokes at me and my work schedule have got to stop. Either be here and be a help and support or go back home. I'll figure something out."

"Like what?" she snapped at him. "A nanny a week until he starts school, then have him come home to an empty house?"

"Jessie, you are pushing it."

Yeah, she was. Why? Just because she was stressed, didn't give her the right to take it out on him. But for some reason she didn't want to stop. "I'm tired, let's just go back to the hotel."

Lying in bed and watching hotel TV seemed like a luxury right now. Mac flagged down the waitress and paid the bill, and they were back in the car. Jess swore she heard grateful applause as they left the building. Maybe that was her imagination. Maybe not.

She turned on the radio and they listened to a Cardinal game on the way back. "I'm looking forward to taking Sam out to the game when he's a little older." Mac said.

"Just don't let him root for the Cubs," she said.

"As if I would. Seriously, Jess?" He pulled into the parking lot and they did their, by now familiar, routine of pulling Sam and all his gear from the car. Thank goodness for click in car seats. Riding the elevator up in silence, she looked over at Mac who stared at the wall. That little stressor he had, a set to his jaw she'd seen before, stood out to her. What was she doing? They'd had a good day, and now they were both unhappy and upset. Why? Because the baby cried in a restaurant? Yeah, that had never happened in the history of life before.

They both had a lot going on and she needed to adult. Grin-

ning suddenly, she realized how she could adult that would make them both feel better, at least eventually.

Silently, they put the baby down and loaded the bottles into the mini fridge and plugged in the warmer so it would be ready later. She put a couple of diapers and wipes on the nightstand and turned the TV on. Sam slept through it, so she turned it up a little bit more and motioned to Mac who sat on the edge of one of the beds.

“Come here,” she said. Walking to the bathroom, she turned on the shower. More noise. Looking around, she grabbed Mac by the arm and pulled him into the bathroom with her and shut the door. The look on his face thrilled her. “Time to put your words into action, big boy,” she told him, heart racing.

“I have literally never been more confused in my life,” he said.

“You are always threatening to blister my ass. Well, I need it, you want to do it. Let’s see what you have in you.”

“Jess, seriously? Don’t be ridiculous.” He looked at her as if she’d grown two heads and he could probably hear her heart pounding. What was she doing? Exploring, that was what she was doing. She was tired of his threats. He either needed to put up or shut up. Prove he could or never say those words again. Besides, she felt as stressed as she ever had in her life and needed some kind of physical release.

Putting her hands on her hips, she stuck her tongue out at him. “Not man enough?”

“Jess, you don’t know what you are asking for.”

Less than thirty seconds later, she agreed with him. “Mac! Ow! Not so hard!” She wasn’t even quite sure how she was over the knee he propped up on the bathtub. All she knew was she felt as if she was going headfirst to the floor and grabbed his other leg with the only hand that could reach it. “Ow!”

“Spankings hurt and you are going to be saying a lot more than ‘ow’ soon,” he said.

“No! Ow! Okay, okay, I got the idea! Ow!” Geeze, that hurt way more than she thought it would. For some reason that made him smack her harder. Obviously, he wasn't hearing her.

“Is this what you need?”

“No! Argh!” He wasn't stopping and her bottom hurt. For some reason, she didn't think it really would, just a nice warm glow or something. “Mac!” She wanted to wiggle but was terrified she'd fall face first onto the bathroom floor, but her bottom needed to get away from those stinging smacks. “That hurts! Please stop, please!”

“Oh, we just got started. You be careful what you ask for, little girl, because now you know I am man enough and will deliver.”

He settled into some kind of rhythm and didn't seem inclined to stop. She figured he'd smack her once or twice and she'd have a little stress relief and a nice warm bottom to sleep on. This was not what she expected! “Mac, I'm sorry! I'm done!” Her feet began kicking as if that would make it stop. Weirdly, it didn't. “Mac! *Ow!*” Dang, her bottom was really starting to hurt! He needed to be done. “Mac!” Ahh, that was the key, her voice rising a few decibels. She'd have to remember that, she thought, glaring at him while suddenly standing on her feet. She didn't know how that happened any more than being put over his knee in the first place. Weird. Putting her hands on her bottom, she started to rub the sting out, but he pulled both her hands in and held her wrists in one of his big hands.

“No, I put that burn there for a reason, you just think about that reason,” he said firmly and she got a little thrill of... what? Something? He'd never spoken to her quite like that before. She didn't like it, she lied to herself. Not one little bit, nope.

He looked at her as if he expected her to say something. What? When in doubt, squeak, “Thank you?” Always good to be polite.

He let go of her hands, laughed and turned the shower off. “I swear, Jess, I have never met anyone like you.”

She still wanted to rub her stinging bottom, but decided she wasn’t going to chance it. Finding her mouth, or maybe her brain, wasn’t working for some reason, she just looked at him. There was really nothing she could say. She’d asked for it. If it turned out more painful than what she thought it would be, well, that was on her, wasn’t it? He didn’t know. She’d have to tell him for next time. Next time? Did she want that again? Oddly, she was already feeling unsettled and irked he didn’t... didn’t what? Finish? Do more? She’d been so ready to be done. Yet.

Sighing, she opened the door to go check on Sam, who had slept through it all.

“Do you need a hug?” Mac asked her, sounding like the old Mac again.

Jess nodded. Yeah, she did need a hug and, well, nothing she could have with Mac. Good thing there were two beds with a crib between them.

“Do you have the warmer set up?” Mac asked.

She nodded. “And the bottles in the mini fridge.” Oh, her mouth worked again. And her bottom didn’t hurt much. Huh. Maybe it hadn’t been as bad as she thought. She needed to look at her bottom, but there was no mirror where the bathroom and shower were. It was outside by the sink. Dang. Thwarted. Surely it was purple and blue? Or maybe not since it barely hurt now.

“Diapers and wipes?”

She pointed to the nightstand and grabbed her night bag. “Can you find a movie? I’m ready for bed.”

She went into the bathroom to change into her soft shorts and tee-shirt she slept in, and tried to look at her bottom. She needed a mirror. Picking up her clothes, she figured she’d wait until Mac came in to change then do a quick peek in the mirror. She was only curious! That was all and just wanted to check it out—it was her bottom! She was allowed, after all.

"All yours," she told him as she came out of the bathroom and headed to put her clothes in the dirty clothes bag she'd brought. As soon as she heard the sound of the lock click, she rushed over to the sink and turned around in front of the big mirror, then dropped her shorts and peeked behind her. Disappointment swept over her. Pale white bottom with a few pale pink splotches. Really? She deserved more. Hearing the sound of the doorknob turn, she scrambled to pull up her shorts and he walked out, just as she almost had them.

"Checking out the damage?" He grinned at her. He really needed to not do that. "How was it?"

"Don't speak to me." Adjusting her waistband she stalked out of the area and to her bed as dignified as she could manage. He went to his bed and grabbed his toiletry kit, then went back to the bathroom area. Without speaking, which she appreciated.

Peeking into the crib where Sam slept with his arms outstretched and his little mouth parted part way. She never got tired of watching him sleep. What would he be like at three, all mouthy and attitude, and five heading off to kindergarten? High school graduation and getting married?

"What are you thinking?" Mac asked her, quietly.

"Of him picking out your nursing home," she said.

"Well, that's a cheery thought." He pulled his covers down and got into bed.

Doing the same, she asked, "Do you think I'll still be part of his life then?"

"You are his aunt and godmother. You were there when he was born. Why wouldn't you be?"

"Life changes. If you marry someone who doesn't like me, I could be cut out easily. And what if my new job takes me across the country? We don't know where life will take us."

"You worry too much, Jess. Watch the movie."

"Or?" Okay, that slipped out.

“Or you will be tired tomorrow. Watch the movie and go to sleep. Night, Jess.”

“Night, Mac.” There was no way she could sleep. Was there? No.

Yet. She struggled awake a few hours later to Sam’s soft cries.

“I got him, you keep sleeping, Jess.” Mac’s voice was soft, tender and filled with love, she thought as she drifted back to sleep. He just sounded different when he held Sam. Maybe Sam wasn’t going to be adrift in the world with Mac as his only parent. It was easy to be sweet to an adorable baby, but there were going to be many challenging times ahead. She needed to make sure Mac could handle them.